The hero's white hands

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The early history of the myth of Achilles on Scyros

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> λάνθανε δ' ἐν κώραις Λυκομηδίσι μοῦνος Ἀχιλλεύς,
> εἴρια δ' ἀνθ' ὅπλων ἐδιδάσκετο, καὶ χερὶ λευκῇ
> παρθενικὸν κόρον εἶχεν, ἐφαίνετο δ' ἠύτε κώρα …
>
> Achilles alone … kept hidden among the daughters of Lycomedes,
> learned about wool working instead of arms, wielded a girl's broom
> in his untanned hand, and looked just like a girl …
>
> [Bion of Smyrna], *Epithalamium of Achilles and Deidameia*, ll.15-17[1]

The story of Achilles' disguisement as a young girl among the daughters of king Lycomedes of Scyros is undoubtedly the most famous ancient myth about cross-dressing, and is well attested in literature and the visual arts from the mid-fifth century BC to at least the fifth century AD[2]. As happens when dealing with ancient mythology, this story has been subject to a great variety of changes, both in its literary and visual accounts. The myth of Achilles on Scyros was especially popular in the Roman imperial and late antique period, when it was among the favourite choices for domestic decoration and funerary sculpture. In this paper, however, I will focus on the early history of this myth, discussing its absence from the archaic version of Achilles' story (as found in Homer and the epic cycle) and its sudden appearance in Athenian literature and art around the mid-fifth century BC, with the aim of investigating its significance and the reasons for its success.

The Scyrian episode in archaic epics

The story of Achilles' cross-dressing on Scyros has strong links with the tale of his erotic adventure with Deidameia, king Lycomedes' daughter. This love affair leads to a son, Neoptolemos, who, according to the prophecies, will be the eventual conqueror of Troy. Although his crucial role in the ending of the war is first attested only in the fifth century BC in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (343-347), Neoptolemos was already known to Homer. Having recalled the conquest and sack of Scyros by Achilles in an earlier phase of the war (*Il.* 6.667-668), the *Iliad* mentions that Neoptolemos was raised there (*Il.* 19.326-327): thus, it may be assumed that Achilles' son was conceived through a Scyrian woman and born on Scyros, though Homer never specifies Deidameia's name or her royal descent[3]. The *Iliad* says nothing about the kind of relationship between Achilles and Neoptolemos' mother: the hero's son might have been conceived through rape, i.e. through Achilles' exerting his normal rights as a conqueror. In any case, for the poet of the *Iliad* this information seems not to have been relevant. We may wonder at the reason behind this silence: as Fantuzzi has recently suggested, «sexual life, or the experience of love, would perhaps

[1] Fantuzzi 2012a; Fantuzzi 2012b: 43-58; Hopkinson 2015: 519-523 [translation by Hopkinson 2015].
[2] Roussel 1991: 121-178 analyses the literary sources about Achilles on Scyros; visual sources are listed in Kossatz-Deissmann 1981: 55-69. The second most famous mythological episode of cross-dressing, although less well attested than the story of Achilles on Scyros, is the myth of Hercules and Omphale, on which see Boardman 1994.
[3] It is questionable why Achilles should have conquered and sacked a Greek city such as Scyros: it has been suggested (Fantuzzi 2012b: 22, note 5) that the Homeric Scyros is not to be identified with the Greek island of the Sporades, but rather with a city (of which we know nothing) situated in Asia Minor, not far from Troy.

have represented something far too human and commonplace, to be integrated into the Iliadic poetics … something not relevant enough to the specific values and concern prevailing in the *Iliad* (war, and war-won glory)»[4].

Achilles' intercourse with Deidameia was definitely mentioned in the epic cycle, more precisely in the *Cypria*, according to the summary of that poem included in Proclus' *Χρηστομαθία γραμματική*, written presumably in the second century AD (Procl. *chr.* ll. 129-131 Severyns = *Cypria* arg. 7b-c West)[5]. But again, Proclus' concise summary says nothing about the kind of relationship linking Achilles to Neoptolemos' mother, not to mention any reference to the hero's cross-dressing[6]. The latter is explicitly mentioned in a scholion to *Il.* 19.326, which recounts the whole story of Achilles' disguisement as a girl at Lycomedes' court, his discovery by Odysseus and his eventual departure for war, as well as his love affair with Deidameia and the birth of Neoptolemos, who in turn joined the Greek army after his father's death. However, the final sentence attributing this story to the epic cycle («ἡ ἱστορία παρὰ τοῖς κυκλικοῖς») has rightly been linked by recent scholarship only to the last part of the scholion, referring to Neoptolemos' departure for Troy, and not to the whole Scyrian myth[7]. We must therefore conclude that, as Fantuzzi puts it, the epic cycle certainly «contained a version of the encounter between Achilles and Deidameia», but «neither the fact that the young Achilles was led to Scyros by an anxious protective parent nor the trick of cross-dressing or its detection by Odysseus appears to be attested» in ancient epic tradition[8].

Achilles on Scyros in fifth-century Athens: Cimon, Euripides, Polignotus

The theme of Achilles' cross-dressing first occurs with certainty only in the mid-fifth century BC[9]. Around this time, the story of the hero's disguisement as a girl at Lycomedes' court was the focus of a play by Euripides, the *Skyrioi*, which is now lost and whose precise date is unknown[10]. On the basis of a fragment of *hypothesis* preserved on papyrus (*PSI* 1286, col. II, ll. 9-27) and a few extant fragments (notably frg. 683a Kannicht) we can assess that the play portrayed Achilles dressed as a girl and occupied with typically feminine tasks such as combing wool. But Euripides' play is not an isolated testimony: the story of Achilles' stay on Scyros was quite popular in mid-fifth century Athens, both on stage and in the visual arts. A painting by Polygnotus of Thasos, depicting «Achilles leading his life on Scyros together with the maidens» in what sounds like a scene from a gynaeceum, is mentioned in the second century AD by Pausanias in his description of the Propylaea of the Athenian Acropolis (Paus. 1,22,6). Admittedly, Pausanias does not explicitly state that Polygnotus' painting was preserved in the Propylaea, since he mentions it only in association with another work by the same painter, representing the sacrifice of Polyxena, which was located there. The association between the two is made possible by the fact that both episodes, as Pausanias remarks, have been omitted by Homer, because these shameful stories are not consistent with his portrayal of Achilles as a positive, paradigmatic hero. Pausanias here makes a very interesting point: the inconsistency with Achilles' heroic character is precisely the main reason why writers and artists proved so interested in this myth throughout antiquity and later. In

[4] Fantuzzi 2012b: 3.
[5] Proclus' *Chrestomathia* is edited by Severyns 1938-1963, vol. 4; for a brief introduction to Proclus' work see West 2013: 4-11.
[6] As West 2013: 107 rightly points out, Proclus' γαμεῖ (translated as 'épouse' by Severyns) «may mean no more than 'had intercourse with'».
[7] Fantuzzi 2012b: 21-29; Tsagalis 2012; West 2013: 103-104.
[8] Fantuzzi 2012b: 26.
[9] On the myth of Achilles on Scyros in 5th c. BC Athens, see Heslin 2005: 195-203.
[10] Jouan, Van Looy 1998-2002, vol. 3: 51-74; Kannicht 2004: 665-670, part. 667 on the uncertainty about the date (the *Skyrioi* are generally classed among Euripides' early plays, but without firm evidence); Fantuzzi 2012b: 29-38. There was also a *Skyrioi* written by Sophocles, which dealt with Neoptolemos' departure for Troy.

any case, the depiction of Achilles on Scyros fits in quite well with the other five Polygnotan paintings described by Pausanias as hanging in the same place, all depicting subjects from the Trojan saga, and all featuring mythical heroes in rather non-heroic activities[11].

The period generally assumed for Polygnotus' activity (*ca*. 480-440 BC) coincides with the establishment of Athenian hegemony in the Aegean. The painter from Thasos is known to have worked on important public buildings at this time, including the famous *Stoa Poikile* in the Agora, whose decoration, accomplished in the 470s or 460s BC, was strongly imbued with the ideology of the period following the Persian wars. This was when the *strategos* Cimon was the leading figure in the city, whose aim was to legitimate the Athenians' ambition for hegemony through the commemoration of their mythical and recent military achievements[12]. If Polygnotus' Trojan paintings, subsequently located in the Propylaea, were indeed originally produced as a coherent cycle, they may possibly be ascribed to the same patronage. But it is admittedly rather hard to place the Achilles-on-Scyros episode in this ideological context in a plausible way. It is easy to link the sudden appearance, in mid-fifth century Athens, of myths taking place on Scyros to the Athenian conquest of that island, achieved by Cimon around 475-470 BC. Under these circumstances, a myth emphasising the connection between Athens and Scyros was especially publicised: according to this story Theseus, the mythical founder of Athens, left the city, disgusted by the intemperance of its inhabitants. He then took refuge on Scyros, but was killed there by king Lycomedes, who was jealous of his power and authority. Cimon and the Athenians clearly used this story for ideological purposes: the Athenian attack on Scyros was presented as vengeance for Theseus' murder, and Cimon even brought the hero's relics, allegedly found on the island, as an oracle had prophesied, back to Athens[13]. But, as P.J. Heslin has pointed out[14], if the myth of Theseus' death on Scyros is perfectly explicable in the context of Cimonian propaganda, the same cannot be said for the story of Achilles' disguisement as a girl, which has no immediately perceptible political significance.

Unfortunately, due to the fragmentary state of preservation of Euripides' *Skyrioi* and the loss of Polygnotus' painting on this subject, it is very difficult to assess the role of these two works in the elaboration and diffusion of the myth of Achilles on Scyros. An analysis of the earliest extant depictions of this mythical episode in Athenian vase painting will hopefully help our understanding of the subject.

Achilles on Scyros in Athenian vase painting

1. The earliest possible representation of Achilles dwelling among Lycomedes' daughters was tentatively recognized by Gloria Ferrari in an Attic red-figure *kylix* once in the Elie Borowski collection, attributed by Beazley to the Oedipus Painter and dated ca. 470-450 BC[15]. As Ferrari rightly observes, the scenes on the two sides of the cup take place in a unified setting, suggested by the presence of four identical Ionic columns, distributed in pairs on the two sides. One side (fig. 1) depicts a gynaeceum scene with three female spinners, one (presumably an older woman) seated at the centre and two standing at either side, all dressed with a chiton, a mantle and a snood; on the

[11] Pausanias' list includes six paintings by Polygnotus, representing: Philoctetes on Lemnos; the theft of the Palladium; Orestes killing Aegisthus; the sacrifice of Polyxena; Achilles on Scyros; and the encounter of Odysseus and Nausicaa.

[12] Among the most recent studies on the *Stoa Poikile* and its paintings see De Angelis 1996; Di Cesare 2002; Stansbury-O'Donnell 2005.

[13] The story of Theseus' death on Scyros and the search for his tomb can be found in Plutarch, both in the *Life of Theseus* and the *Life of Cimon* (Plu. *Thes.* 35-36; *Cim.* 8,3-7). On the conquest of Scyros, its integration into early Athenian history, and its role in legitimating the Athenian hegemony see Podlecki 1971; Tausend 1989; Moreau 1990: 215-218; Shapiro 1992; McCauley 1999; and especially Fell 2004.

[14] Heslin 2005: 199-201.

[15] Beazley 1963: 451,3; Leipen 1984, no. 13; Carpenter 1989: 242; Christie's 2000: 86-87, no. 83; Ferrari 2002: 89-90; Fantuzzi 2012b: 35-36. Record of the vase in the *Beazley Archive* website: www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/5D7951DB-6D47-43CC-B049-F187D075ADB2.

right another feminine element, a mirror, hangs from the wall. On the other side (fig. 2), a young warrior is putting on his armour: he has already donned his greaves, and is busy fastening the cuirass on top of his short chiton, while another young man, clad only in a mantle, is handing him a helmet and a shield; a third man, an older bearded warrior with cuirass and spear, stands to the right. The difference between the arrangement of the human figures and the architectural elements in the two scenes is striking: the group of the three spinners in the gynaeceum is framed by the two flanking columns in a symmetrical and rather static scene: as Ferrari puts it, «the women are where they belong, … doing what proper girls normally do, and they will remain there»[16]. On the contrary, the scene with the three male characters conveys an impression of imminent movement. The two columns do not frame the whole group, but only the two youths to the left; the older warrior on the right is located outside the architectural frame. We may assume that he has just left the house: his feet point towards the outside, his left arm is extended to the right, while his head is turned back towards the main character, inviting him to follow. The central figure, although standing firmly on the ground, is actually caught up in two opposite movements: the head is turned to the left towards the helping youth, the right leg is depicted frontally, while the left foot points towards the right, in the direction of the older warrior.

The interpretation of this image as the departure of Achilles from Scyros, as put forward by Ferrari, is suggested especially by «the pointed contraposition of the arming to the spinning of the three girls»[17]. This is of course true, but it has to be admitted that there is no firm evidence confirming that the vase depicts an identifiable mythical scene: no character is clearly recognisable as Achilles, Deidameia or Lycomedes, and no reference is detectable to either cross-dressing or concealment and unveiling. The vase could likewise depict a generic young warrior leaving his house, where the women of the household shall wait for his return by busying themselves with typical female activities. In other words, the decoration of the vase can be interpreted as depicting not a specific mythological episode, but simply the ideal contrast between male and female occupations[18]: a contrast which is of course essential in the story of Achilles on Scyros, but could also be formulated without any recourse to this mythological paradigm. More evidence to support Ferrari's interpretation can perhaps be offered by the interior of the cup, which is decorated with the image of a Satyr holding a casket (fig. 3). Since Satyrs are usually not supposed to handle household objects, this detail could suggest a link with a theatrical play, in particular with a Satyr-play. Scholars have long supposed that Euripides' *Skyrioi*, given its non-tragic subject matter, was not a proper tragedy but, if not an actual Satyr-play, at least a sort of melodrama *in lieu* of a Satyr-play, like *Alcestis*[19]. But, in my opinion, there is too little evidence to positively identify this *kylix* as representing Achilles' departure from Scyros: paradoxically, the vase can be seen as an accurate depiction not of the myth of Achilles on Scyros, but rather of the social and anthropological interpretations attached to this myth by modern scholars.

2. A more reliable identification of the myth of Achilles on Scyros has been advanced for a scene depicted on an Attic red-figure volute *krater* whose provenance is debated (Italy or Cyrene?), preserved at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, attributed by Beazley to the Niobid Painter and dated ca. 450 BC[20] (figs. 4-5). The main scene (fig. 6) depicts a rather common theme in Athenian vase painting: the departure of a warrior. A youth, almost fully armed with cuirass, sword and

[16] Ferrari 2002: 90.
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] As suggested by Fantuzzi 2012b: 35: «Unless the two sides of the cup simply depict the opposition between typical manly and female occupations (an alternative interpretation which cannot be easily discarded)».
[19] Thus Körte 1934: 12.
[20] Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 33.56. Caskey, Beazley 1931-1963, vol. 2: 77-81, no. 108; Beazley 1963: 600,12; Simon 1963: 57-61; Beazley 1971: 395; Kemp-Lindemann 1975: 58-60; Kossatz-Deissmann 1981: 65-66, no. 176; Burn, Glynn 1982: 130; Carpenter 1989: 266; Prange 1989: 183 no. N 13; Schefold, Jung 1989: 141-142; Kossatz-Deissmann 1992: 300, no. 16; Touchefeu-Meynier 1992: 776, no. 13; Walter-Karydi 2015: 227-228. Record of the vase in the *Beazley Archive* website: http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/6D6A771D-29DC-4C01-8F76-985BC60E4436.

spear, holds the hand of a woman, who is handing him his helmet and his second spear; the two are staring into each other's eyes, thus emphasizing the strong emotional relationship between them. Seated on the left, an old man with white hair and beard looks at the scene, his right hand raised towards the youth, his left hand resting on a staff. These three main characters are framed and separated from one another by four female figures, spaced out in a perfectly balanced composition: from left to right, the first one (clearly younger than the others) is leaning on the back of the old man's chair; the second is holding a wreath; the third has a *phiale* in her right hand and an *oinochoe* in her left; and the fourth holds a veil with both hands. Inside this carefully balanced scene, two vertical elements (a Doric column on the left, a spear on the right) further contribute to isolating the dramatic centre of the depiction, with the farewell between the youth and the main female character. As Erika Simon rightly pointed out, when compared with the usual iconography of the 'departure of a warrior' this scene shows a number of peculiarities: firstly, an exceptional number of women (five) is depicted; secondly, there is clearly a strong accent on the privileged relationship between the young warrior and one of the female characters; thirdly, the attributes held by the side figures are not all that usual, and may be the cue for a more accurate interpretation. A standard feature in these departure scenes is the pouring of a libation, as the warrior and his relatives pray to the gods to propitiate the young man's homecoming from war: the *phiale* and the *oinochoe*, as well as the wreath, can easily be explained as allusions to this ritual. The same cannot be said about the veil: Simon is probably right in recognizing it, together with the wreath, as a reference to a wedding ritual. In this case, the attributes pertaining to the two spouses are depicted in a chiastic composition, with the girl next to the armed youth holding the bride's veil, while the one next to the bride holds the young man's wreath. The presence of wedding allusions within this departure scene, along with the unusual number of female characters, make the identification of the scene depicted on the Boston *krater* with an episode from the myth of Achilles on Scyros, as proposed by Simon, quite persuasive: if so, here the painter chose to focus particularly on the tragic destiny of Deidameia, deprived of her husband on the very same day as her wedding.

The emphasis on Deidemeia's sufferings, more than on Achilles himself, is further accentuated if we accept the interpretation of the scenes on the other side of the vase as alluding to the departure of Neoptolemos: after losing her husband, Deidameia will also have to witness her son leaving for war. Admittedly, the departure scene on side B of the *krater* (fig. 7) is quite unspecific, and precise hints for identification are lacking. The scene takes place under the porch of a building (marked by a Doric column at the centre and a door at the right end): a youth, in full armour with shield, spear and helmet, is pouring a libation from a *phiale*. The young warrior is surrounded by four women: two of them hold wreaths, a third one has the *oinochoe* for the libation, while the fourth, preserved in a very fragmentary condition, stands in front of the door. The small scene under the handle of the vase may be more useful for the purposes of suggesting an identification (fig. 8): a young hunter, dressed in a chlamys and holding two spears with his left hand, is approached by two characters, an adult man on the left and an old man on the right; communication is shown between the youth and the adult man, who are looking into each other's eyes. The adult and the old man have wreaths on their heads and staffs in their hands, and the latter also holds a twig in his left hand: these attributes qualify the two men as ambassadors. All these features make an identification of the two as Odysseus and Phoinix, while asking Neoptolemos to follow them to Troy, quite plausible: the small scene under the handle may be a prelude to the warrior's departure depicted in scene B, while at the same time contributing to the identification of this latter, rather unspecified scene with a particular mythological episode.

3. A third depiction of the myth of Achilles on Scyros has been identified by Erika Simon in another Attic red-figure volute *krater*. The vase, found in 1956 in Spina (from tomb 18C of the Valle Pega necropolis) and preserved in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Ferrara, is attributed

by Beazley to the Boreas Painter and dated ca. 460-450 BC[21] (figs. 9-10). One side of the vase depicts Neoptolemos leaving Scyros (fig. 11): the young hero is standing in the centre of the scene, dressed with cuirass and mantle and holding a spear; Odysseus and Phoinix lead him towards the right, where a young attendant is waiting with the hero's shield, while Neoptolemos turns his head backwards to say farewell to his mother Deidameia and his grandfather Lycomedes. In this case, the inscriptions with the names of the characters assure beyond any doubt the identification of the episode. On the other side (fig. 12), an ephebe is shown standing among four young women: he wears a *himation* and rests his right shoulder on a staff; his blond hair (rendered with diluted black paint) falls freely over his shoulders. The four women are looking towards him, making forceful gestures and movements, their arms raised in expressions of surprise and powerful emotion. The two women that are most distant from the centre are moving towards the ephebe, bringing him two objects: the one on the right holds a cuirass, while the one on the left has a sack, probably to be used for his journey. At the right edge of the scene a king, sitting on his throne, richly dressed with chiton and mantle and holding a staff, looks on at the scene, his right arm raised in the same gesture of heightened emotion characterising the four women (fig. 13). As Simon rightly points out, «that is not a silent departure but a scene of surprise and agitation»[22]. Another significant detail is noticeable in the figure of the old man, whose teeth are visible through the open mouth. This is a characteristic way of expressing strong emotions in fifth-century art[23], whose invention is attributed by Pliny to Polygnotus[24], the same painter who was the author, according to Pausanias, of the first depiction of Achilles on Scyros attested by literary sources. The surprise and agitation shown by the female characters and the old men make an interpretation as a standard departure scene quite implausible; moreover, the uncommon number of female characters, the ephebe's blond hair (a well-known characteristic of Achilles'), and the association with a depiction of Neoptolemos leaving Scyros all point towards an interpretation of the scene on side B of the vase as Achilles among Lycomedes' daughters.

These three vases, one *kylix* and two *krateres*, are all linked to the context of the symposium, a social occasion to which only men were admitted: thus, it must be borne in mind that these images were created to cater for a male viewer's expectations, and of course reflect a male point of view on the story of Achilles' disguisement and its gender-related implications. This remark is particularly important as regards the *kylix* by the Oedipus painter, which seems only loosely, if at all, connected with the mythological episode. Rather than recounting a story, the quiet and balanced figures on this vase are depicted in a sort of symbolic scene, whose imagery focuses on the ideal contrast between male and female activities and spaces, as well as their transmission from one generation to another: while the girls remain within the house together with the seated older woman, who is busy spinning and weaving, the young warrior prepares to follow the older man outside the building, in order to fulfil a man's duty in the male world of war. It is not implausible that, in a viewer's mind from the ancient world, this depiction could have raised an association with the story of Achilles' stay among the girls and his subsequent decision to follow Odysseus to war, glory, and death. But here the link with the mythological narrative is subordinated to an exemplary statement of gender contraposition

[21] Ferrara, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. no. 44701. Alfieri, Arias 1958, pp. 44-46; Alfieri 1963; Alfieri 1964; Beazley 1963: 536.4, 1658; Simon 1963: 57-58; Beazley 1971: 384; Alfieri 1979, pp. 24-26; Burn, Glynn 1982: 125; Deubner 1988: 138-140; Carpenter 1989: 255; Schefold, Jung 1989: 139-140; Kossatz-Deissmann 1992: 300, no. 14; Touchefeu-Meynier 1992: 776, no. 11; Lissarrague 1998: 70-72; Walter-Karydi 2015: 228-229. Record of the vase in the *Beazley Archive* website: http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/63AA7C6F-F89B-4183-841C-D56B87602CA1.

[22] Simon 1963: 58.

[23] According to Deubner 1988: 140, this feature conveys feelings of «exertion, pain, imminence of death … vivaciousness of expression».

[24] Plin. *nat.* 35,58: «Polygnotus Thasius … plurimum … picturae primus contulit, siquidem instituit os adaperire, dentes ostendere, voltum ab antiquo rigore variare» («Polygnotus of Thasos … first contributed many improvements to the art of painting, as he introduced showing the mouth open and displaying the teeth and giving expression to the countenance in place of the primitive rigidity» [translation by Hackham 1961, with modifications]).

and the generational transfer of social models, by focusing on the different roles which young men and women were expected to play in fifth-century Athenian society.

The other two vases are more interesting from a narratological point of view: in both of them the reference to a mythological episode is more clearly recognizable, although with the emphasis on different moments and details of the story. Moreover, both vases associate Achilles' myth with another episode from the same saga: Neoptolemos' departure for Troy. The association between these two episodes is extremely significant: Achilles' discovery on Scyros and his subsequent departure to join the Greek army mark the initial stage of the Trojan war, just as Neoptolemos' arrival at Troy brings the expedition towards its conclusion. Thus, a viewer could find the whole story of the war summarized and condensed in these two scenes, in a refined strategy of allusion and association of ideas. However, these two departures are not only parts of one common narrative; they can also be deliberately contrasted with one another, as two quite similar, but emotionally opposite, episodes. Neoptolemos' departure for Troy is hardly a dramatic scene: every viewer knows that the young hero will be the final conqueror of the city; by leaving Scyros, he fulfils these expectations and sets out for victory and immortal glory. The case of Achilles is different: his departure is a highly theatrical scene, in which three emotionally significant issues occur together. Firstly, the discovery of Achilles' true identity and his intercourse with Deidameia is an authentic *coup-de-théâtre*, bringing great turmoil to Lycomedes' court; secondly, Achilles has to leave Scyros just when his love for Deidameia has finally been granted public acknowledgement and legitimation: the two lovers have to separate on their very wedding day; thirdly, every viewer obviously knows that Achilles will never come back from Troy, where an untimely death awaits him, and immortal glory.

The painters of the two *krateres* exploited this dramatic potential in very different ways. The Boreas painter chose to concentrate on the agitation in Lycomedes' court at the discovery of Achilles' identity: his depiction skilfully contrasts the noble figure of the young hero, still depicted as an ephebe, with the heightened gestures of Lycomedes and his daughters, emphasising the disruptive effect of the sudden appearance of war in the peaceful context of the Scyrian gynaeceum. In this respect, the Ferrara *krater* can perhaps be considered as a predecessor of what was later to become the most widespread iconography of the Scyrian episode, which focused on the dramatic revelation of Achilles' true identity. As a scheme, it was probably invented in the late classical period[25] and became standard especially in Roman imperial times[26]. On the contrary, the Niobid painter depicted a more static scene, in which the tragic potential of the story is suspended, and emotions are expressed only through the intimate relationship between the main characters: the expression of love between Achilles and Deidameia relies only on the figures' gazes and gestures, in a composition whose dramatic force is in no way diminished by its sense of calm and equilibrium. While the Boreas painter contrasts the agitated scene of Achilles' discovery with the tranquil departure of Neoptolemos, the Niobid painter pairs the latter's departure with the simultaneous wedding and farewell between his parents: the artist's emphasis is less on Achilles' departure for Troy than on the doomed love of Lycomedes' daughter.

The significance of Achilles on Scyros

These depictions of Achilles on Scyros are a testimony to how this myth managed to be narrated in different ways from the very beginning of its history, in a plurality of approaches that

[25] Scholars have traditionally attributed the invention of this iconography to Athenion of Maroneia, a painter of the late fourth century BC, on the basis of Plin. *nat.* 35,134: «Athenion Maronites … pinxit … Achillem virginis habitu occultatum Ulixe deprendente» («Athenion of Maroneia … painted … an Achilles disguised in female dress detected by Odysseus» [translation by Hackham 1961, with modifications]).

[26] The earliest preserved example of the standard version of the episode is a painting on the ceiling of room 119 (the so-called 'Volta di Achille') of Nero's *Domus Aurea* (Meyboom, Moormann 2013, vol. I: 228-230; vol. II: 158-165).

coexisted up until the end of antiquity. The principal variations in the long history of this myth can be organised around two main polarisations:

1) Cross-dressing as transition *vs.* cross-dressing as deception. Achilles' cross-dressing can be interpreted in an anthropological way as a sort of coming-of-age *rite de passage*, a momentous transition in shaping the hero's personality as an adult male. On the other hand, from a narratological point of view, Achilles' cross-dressing can be viewed as a consciously deceptive device, functional to the needs and expectations of an already fully shaped self.
2) Cross-dressing as a temporary *vs.* permanent condition. Achilles' cross-dressing can be seen as the mark of a transitional period in his life, with his ultimate refusal of women's clothes indicating an irrevocable separation with the past and the beginning of his true heroic (male) career. On the other hand, Achilles' feminine condition can be intended as just one among many concurrent aspects of his character: in this way he can acquire, in addition to his unquestionable heroic qualities, another set of positive values traditionally connected with the feminine sphere, such as beauty, refinement, and eroticism.

In general terms, both these polarizations tend to shift from the first to the second pole over the course of time, especially with the passage from classical Greece to Hellenistic and Roman culture. Achilles' disguisement among the girls has traditionally been viewed as the mythical representation of a coming-of-age ritual, in which the denial of the young hero's masculinity only serves the purpose of enhancing his male and heroic character, through his love affair with Deidameia and the final unveiling of his real nature by Odysseus[27]. According to this theory, the myth of Achilles on Scyros symbolises the critical transition from the indeterminateness of boyhood to the completeness of adulthood, and it seems quite obvious that this significance decreased over time, in particular with the loss of importance of Achilles as a role model for young citizens.

However, this is not entirely true. The importance of Achilles as a role model for young males seems to have actually increased from classical Greece to the imperial and late antique periods[28]. But the main objection against the interpretation of Achilles' cross-dressing as representing a coming-of-age ritual is provided precisely by the anthropological comparisons of cross-dressing rituals involving young boys. Through a careful re-examination of the ethnographic evidence, P.J. Heslin has demonstrated[29] the incompatibility between the story of Achilles on Scyros and gender-related *rites de passage* for adolescents in tribal societies. During these rituals, boys are secluded from their homes and families in order to integrate them into an exclusively male environment, with the purpose of enforcing gender solidarity within the community of men. On the contrary, the story of Achilles on Scyros is centred precisely on the undermining of the hero's male identity: Achilles is blocked inside an exclusively female community, at his mother's behest, preventing or at least delaying his development into a fully-grown male member of society. The idea that a boy could achieve a new status as an adult man through the denial of his own masculinity is completely alien to what we know about coming-of-age rituals in tribal societies. Far from representing a *rite de passage* to manhood, the myth of Achilles on Scyros poses a serious threat to Achilles' gender identity, showing how evanescent and unstable gender differences can be if a boy is wrongly included in a community of the opposite sex. As a consequence, as Heslin asserted, the anthropological interpretations of the myth based on ethnographic comparisons should be abandoned in favour of a more banal explanation centring on the competition for prestige among Greek archaic communities: the myth of Achilles' cross-dressing was probably a local Scyrian invention, designed to give the island more eminent (and more Greek) status in comparison to the

[27] Vidal-Naquet 1981: 164-169; Silveira Cyrino 1998: 226-239.
[28] Cameron 2009.
[29] Heslin 2005: 205-236.

'official' epic version, which depicted Scyros as a small stronghold sacked by the Greeks on their way to Troy[30].

In the mid-fifth century BC, with the conquest and colonisation of Scyros by the Athenians, as well as their appropriation of the mythical past of the island (despite focusing primarily not on Achilles but on Theseus), the story of Achilles on Scyros entered the broader Greek world for the first time, and it was immediately taken up by writers and artists. This story was appealing not only because it gave rise to the possibility of manipulating the traditional features of mythological characters, thanks to «its potential to undermine the manliness of the paradigmatic epic hero» (Heslin 2005: 227); but also because it offered the opportunity to discuss other aspects of great interest to fifth-century Athenian culture, especially in tragedy, such as the contrasts between will *vs.* destiny, war *vs.* love, the tranquillity of peace *vs.* the pursuit of glory. In all these cases, the story of Achilles on Scyros offered a version of the myth that was quite different from the traditional epic material: it opened a more nuanced way of interpreting one of the most famous heroes in Greek culture, making him much more exploitable as a character in literature, drama, and the visual arts. The different ways this myth is depicted in vase painting further testify to the absence of a fixed anthropological or ideological meaning to the story. The reason for the success of the story of Achilles on Scyros can rather be attributed primarily to its unquestionable dramatic potential, which led to sustained interest in this myth on the part of artists and writers: an interest which, arising in fifth-century Athens, would continue without interruption for the rest of antiquity, leaving its mark well into modern and contemporary culture.

[30] In Heslin's words: «The Achilles-in-Scyros myth … probably had its origin in the local patriotism of the people of Scyros; this picture of Achilles' stay as a draft-dodger was more flattering to them than the Homeric and cyclic story that they were conquered by Achilles» (Heslin 2005: 228).